

Zoya Voskresenskaya



THE OLD ARM-CHAIR

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Dear reader!

The book you are now holding in your hands will let you learn several episodes of Volodya Ulyanov's (Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's) green years and some childhood experiences of his brothers and sisters.



THE OLD ARM-CHAIR

There was a large leather arm-chair in Papa's study. It was always cold to the touch and uncomfortable, even on a hot day. That is why a child had to sit in it for misconduct. The slightest movement made it creak angrily, as though it, too, were angry at the mischief-maker.

Mitya sat in the arm-chair, listening to the alarm clock ticking. Mama usually wound up the knob that started a little tune when the time of punishment was over so that the moment the tune began, it meant you could jump down and leave the room. But she did not do it that day. She simply said that Mitya was to sit in the arm-chair for thirty minutes, to think of what he had done and to do his arithmetic lesson.

But Mitya did not want to think.

He wanted to join his brothers and sisters in the dining-room, for they were busy making toys for the New Year's tree. And so, instead of covering walnuts with imitation gold foil, he was to sit in the dark arm-chair.

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Besides, the alarm clock would not tell him when his thirty minutes were up.

During his arithmetic class that morning, the teacher had held up a cardboard clock and moved the tin hands, asking the pupils what time it was. When it was Mitya's turn to reply, he did not know the answer and so got a bad mark. He had not learned the lesson because their cow Beauty had calved the previous day, and he had sat beside the new-born calf all evening. The calf was very cute. Though it had only been a few hours old, it had tried to stand up on its wobbly, spindly legs, but they had slid apart. Mitya had stroked the calf's head and stuck his finger in its mouth, and the calf had sucked his finger. Its tongue was rough and tickly, and its nose was pink. There was a round dark spot on its nose between the nostrils. Its eyes were big and sad.

Mitya's mother, Maria Alexandrovna, had said that they could see the calf in turn as it was still very weak and needed a good sleep.

The children had gone into the house to do their homework, but Mitya had crept back to the shed to sit by the calf. Even now he was anxious to be there with it and wondered whether it was able to stand up yet. But he had to sit in the arm-chair and do his arithmetic lesson. He did not want to.

Mother had said he was to sit there for thirty minutes, till a quarter to five. He did not know when that would be.

He sat there, thinking hard.

There were dots and dashes all around the face of the clock. He knew that the distance between two dots was equal to one minute, and the distance between two dashes—to five minutes. The minute hand would be still for a moment and then it would suddenly jerk, hopping from one dot to the next, while the little hour hand didn't seem to be moving at all. Where would the minute hand be when it was a quarter to five?



The door creaked and Puss-in-Boots peeped in. Puss had on a wide-brimmed hat with a plume.

"Miaow!"

"I know it's you, Volodya. Come here. Show me where the minute hand will be when it's a quarter to five."

"Miaow, dear lad," Volodya said. "If I tell you, you'll never learn your arithmetic lesson. Puzzle it out yourself. Miaow, miaow." And Puss-in-Boots disappeared.

Mitya sighed. Would they have time to make him a rabbit mask? He stared so hard at the clock that the arm-chair seemed hot to him. He counted the minutes up several times to make sure which dash on the face of the clock meant freedom.

Mitya could hear the others laughing in the dining-room. Manyasha laughed the loudest. Then he heard the calf moo. The hands of the clock seemed frozen to the spot. He wondered whether he should call Mama and tell her that the clock had stopped.

Mitya wiped away the tears that blurred his eyes. He counted out loud. Seven minutes to go. He was positive, for he had checked it twice.

The calf mooed again. The waiting was intolerable. Still seven more minutes to go. No, only five.

Time never dragged on the way it did when you were sitting in the arm-chair. Usually, the days slipped by unnoticed, but here every minute seemed endless.

At last, the minute hand had but one dot left before the last dash. It would be a quarter to five. He saw that the minute hand had stopped.

Mitya looked away. What if he had hypnotized it by staring at it so hard?

"What time is it, Mitya?" he heard his mother say. She was standing in the doorway.

The minute hand started and hopped to the dash opposite the figure "9".



"It's a quarter to five, Mama. The thirty minutes are up."

"That's right. And did you think about your arithmetic lesson?"

"No, I had no time to," Mitya confessed. "I kept thinking about when I could leave the room."

"What time is it now?"

"It's thirteen minutes to five," he replied, glancing at the clock.

"Good for you. You've learned your arithmetic lesson very well."

Standing there behind her were his brothers and sisters, all wearing their masks. There was Puss-in-Boots. Sasha was Bruin, Olya was a monkey, and Manyasha, in a bluebell cap, was giggling.





PAPA'S CHERRY-TREE

The sun is never as bright as it is in March. The sky is never as clear as it is in March. And the brighter the sun is, the more bitter the night frost.

During the night, the frost covers the puddles with a film of ice. Rows of icicles hang from the bottom edges of the roofs and the snow-drifts bind. In the day-time the sun melts the ice on the puddles. It makes the icicles drip and melt until they fall to the ground with a tinkling sound. The snow-drifts settle, turn dark, and are soaked up by the earth.

In March, the night frost can no longer rebuild all that the sun has destroyed of its realm during the day, for the sun is busy rolling up the blanket of snow to make way for spring.

The snow-slide in the Ulyanovs' yard turned dark and loose. The garden paths appeared as dark strips edged with the last of the sparkling ice and snow.

Mitya and Manyasha waited eagerly for their brothers

and sisters to return from school. Mama had said it was time to whitewash the tree-trunks to protect them from insects, the hot rays of the sun and the night frost.

After lunch, the three brothers and three sisters hurried to the summer kitchen where Sasha had stored some lime and pails. The younger ones watched as he and Anya measured out the lime and mixed it with water in the pails. Each child was given a brush, and Sasha assigned each one a tree. Volodya was to whitewash the old elm by the summerhouse, Olya headed for her favourite alder by the fence, Anya began working on the young apple-trees, while Mitya and Manyasha were each given a small cherry-tree. Sasha chose to whitewash Papa's cherry-tree.

Their father, Ilya Nikolayevich, had brought the cherry-tree from the country three years before. It had not taken well and had nearly withered away. But Sasha and Anya had read a book on gardening and had revived it.

The children were busy whitewashing the trees till twilight. The trunks shone like white columns in the dark.

The first thunderstorm of the year came on Volodya's birthday, and it seemed to have awakened the trees, for the very next morning they were enveloped in a green mist. Several days later the cherry-trees burst into bloom. Coming closer, you could hear a buzzing in the trees.

When Manyasha first saw the bees in the cherry-trees, she became worried, for she thought they would ruin the blossoms, and then there would be no cherries. But Sasha told her that the bees were sucking the sweet nectar and carrying pollen from one blossom to another for the cherries to fruit.

Sasha was in his room, doing his homework. It was late and everyone had gone to bed. Suddenly a gust of wind flung open the window, and snow-flakes came whirling into the room. A cold blast of icy air blew in his face.

Sasha hurried to Volodya's room. "Wake up, Volodya!" he said. "Hurry!"



Volodya sat up in bed, rubbed his eyes and began dressing quickly. He caught up with Sasha on the porch.

The air smelled of winter, snow and fresh greenery. The bitter north wind was ripping off the white petals of the cherry blossoms and sweeping them into the snow flurries. It bent the young trees to the ground. The frost had crept into the orchard like a thief and was killing the blossoms.

Anya was awakened by flashes of light dancing on the ceiling. She looked out of the window and through the whirling snow-storm she saw two shadows beside a bonfire. 'They're trying to save the trees,' she said to herself. Anya dressed quickly. Boots in hand, she tiptoed through the nursery, but one of the floor-boards creaked. Olya raised her head and said,

"Where're you going, Anya?"

"Out to the orchard. I've got to start a bonfire and warm the trees."

"I'm going, too."

"All right, but don't wake the others."

However, Mitya was already sitting up in bed. "The frost will kill Papa's cherry-tree," he said. "I'm so sorry for it."

"All right, come along. But put something warm on. Here, I'll lace your boots," Olya said.

Manyasha curled up in bed, and Anya put another blanket over her.

The wind was rising, beating at the flames of the bonfire. Still, it could not put it out. The frost gripped the tiny young shoots at the ends of the branches with its icy fingers, but the warm smoke of the fire enveloped the branches and warmed them.

Sasha ran out into the street. He knocked at the neighbours' doors and wakened them, saying there had been a sudden frost. Soon bonfires were burning in all the orchards of Simbirsk.

Volodya, Olya and Mitya brought up armfuls of firewood and clumps of straw, while Sasha and Anya built new fires.



The birds awoke and began flitting about. A gust of wind blew the nestlings from their nest above the window. Olya picked them up and wrapped them in her scarf. The baby birds were featherless. They had round blue little bellies and big yellow beaks. The mother sparrow flew about Olya anxiously.

"Don't worry, silly," Olya said. "I'll take your babies to the veranda. We'll return them to your nest as soon as the sun comes up and warms the air."

But the mother sparrow flew right into the glassed-in veranda after Olya.

The children worked hard to save the orchard. In the morning, the sun came to their aid, melting the snow on the rooftops and warming the trees.

They were pale after the sleepless night, but happy, interrupting each other as they sat round the breakfast table, each recounting the night's adventures. Maria Alexandrovna and Ilya Nikolayevich had watched them from their window, but they had decided to let the children battle the frost by themselves. Manyasha alone could not understand why Grandfather Frost, who always came on New Year's eve with a bagful of gifts, had become so horrid in the spring-time, attacking the blossoms and nestlings.

The orchard had been saved. Here and there a few leaves had shrivelled and fallen to the ground, but that was all. Sasha and Volodya put the nestlings back into their nest. Once again the bees began buzzing in the trees. And there were little green blobs on the cherry-trees where the petals had been. Wrens warbled in the dense raspberry-canefields in the mornings. Sparrows flitted back and forth, pecking bugs and caterpillars off the trees.

"Good for them. They're real helpers," Olya said and put some millet into the bird-tray.

Soon school was out. The cherries were becoming red and plump. The once-green apples were now lighter than the



leaves, and the strawberries were ripe. The garden and orchard were beautiful.

Volodya sat comfortably on a big branch of the old elm. He was eating sunflower seeds and reading. Then he moved, making the branch sway. This caused a little flock of sparrows to rise from his father's cherry-tree. The birds circled over it, but in a few moments they were back again, pecking bits of the juicy fruit from the cherries, which were becoming shrivelled and ugly to look at. Volodya felt they had taken a liking to his father's tree. He climbed down quickly and ran off to find Sasha, Anya and Olya.

How were they to save Papa's cherry-tree?

Olya said they should put a lot of millet in the bird-tray.

"They're too clever to peck millet when there are fresh cherries," Volodya said.

Sasha thought of a way to chase the birds away. The girls cut strips of shiny tin foil and threaded them on long pieces of string. The boys hung the garlands on the trees, paying special attention to their father's tree. The wind made the strips flutter and rustle, and flash in the sun, scaring the sparrows away. They circled over the cherry-tree awhile and then flew off to the bird-tray and the millet.

July 14th was Papa's birthday. Ilya Nikolayevich's friends, colleagues and pupils came to wish him a happy birthday.

A table with a large birthday cake in the centre had been laid in the summerhouse beside Papa's cherry-tree. The tree was now full of dark shiny cherries. The branches were bent under their heavy burden.

Anya went up to the tree with a pair of scissors. She cut the string, and the tin-foil garlands fell to the ground.

"Come, help yourselves," she said to the grown-ups.

"First guess my riddle," Volodya said to the children. "I'm as round as a ball, as red as blood and as good as honey. What am I?"

"A cherry, a cherry!" they all cried.



“Let’s see if that’s so,” he said and laughed.

Everyone went up to the tree to pick the juicy cherries. And everyone praised them highly. Manyasha soon had cherry juice all over her face and hands and was as red as a cherry herself. The sparrows came flying up to the tree for their share and no one chased them away any more, for there were plenty of cherries for everybody.







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